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SUBJECT: Lebanon: Media Reaction - February 17, 2009

Atmospherics:

Media outlets highlighted the "serious events" that occurred over the weekend: the commemoration of former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination, the stabbing of a Druze who participated in the commemoration, efforts by MP Walid Jumblatt and MP Saad Hariri to contain the repercussions of the stabbing and maintain calm, the first commemoration of the assassination of Hizballah's military commander Imad Mughnieh, and efforts by the Hizballah Secretary General to emphasize the atmosphere of calm. The press also highlighted an "important" revelation by Nasrallah in which he said that Hizballah has the right to acquire air defense, as well as the right to use it.

On the regional level, the press highlighted Senator Kerry's visit to the region, as well as an expected visit by Congressman Howard Berman to Syria.

Selected Headlines

"Nasrallah Reaches Out to Rivals, Warns Israelis to Stay Home; We Have the Right to Air Defense" English-language, Beirut-based The Daily Star

"Hariri Supports Junblatt's Efforts To Contain Anger in the Mountain and Will Meet Mubarak in Cairo" Pro-Sunni Al-Liwa'

"Nasrallah: We Have The Right to Air Defense and To Use it If We Want" Independent Al-Bayraq

"The Resistance Leadership Raises Israel's Concerns: We Have The Right To Air Defense" Arab nationalist As-Safir

Block Quotes:

"Berman to Visit Damascus to Reinforce Lifting the Ban, but He is carrying a Strong Message," an editorial by Nicolas Nassif in pro-opposition Al-Akhbar (2/17):

"Lebanese visitors returned from Washington with information related to the American position on Syria and Lebanon. On Syria, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Congressman Howard Berman, will travel to Damascus soon on a visit that will increase confirmation that the American political ban on Syria and Assad's Regime has been lifted. The person who will be coordinating this visit is his colleague Senator Kerry. Berman's visit is very important because he is the Godfather of the Syria Accountability Act that was issued in 2003. ...Berman is carrying a very strong message to Damascus to urge it to cooperate seriously with Washington so that Washington will not have to re-use President Bush's policy towards Assad. ...In this regard, sources noted that reports by Ambassador Sison to the State Department included fears that were expressed by March 14 over this new U.S. policy toward

Syria and the possibility of its negative impact on Lebanon and its current majority. ...Some sources believe that Hazem Ash-Shahabi, who is the son of former General in the Syrian Army Hikmat Ash-Shahabi, is actually behind Berman's visit to Damascus, because he is a well-known personality in California. As for Lebanon, it is believed that the State Department staff on Near East Affairs has not been completed yet. So far, no one has been appointed to replace Assistant Secretary Welch, although it is believed that former Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman is one of the most outstanding candidates for this post. ...Furthermore, it is believed that David Hale, who was appointed as Feltman's assistant has been withdrawn from this position and was appointed as a special assistant to special Middle East envoy George Mitchell. This means that Hale's next mission in the region will not have to do with Lebanon, but with the peace process..."

Sison